

The Battle Won

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been surprised to find that there was already a string of carriages drawn up in the road; smart carriages, and still smarter motors, and a spruce-looking parlour-maid—one who had evidently been hired for the afternoon, ushered him into his own house, evidently taking him for a guest, and he followed the girl in a dazed sort of fashion across the long strip of red carpet which had been laid across the garden to the studio.

But it was when he had entered the studio that he started back in surprise, for never had a room been so utterly, so recklessly transformed.

There was a Moorish screen in one corner, and a gaudy Oriental curtain trailed over it on one side, a curtain that obviously hailed from Liberty's, whilst a big velvet *portière* fell back from the open doorway, very effective in its pea-cock blue tinting, and affording a rich background to a huge brass vase heaped up with glorious white lilies.

Eastern rugs had been purchased and thrown down on the stained floor, and Fay had been at the pains to purchase some antique-looking Louis XV. chairs. An Empire couch stood at one end of the room, planted on a tiger skin; and flowers were everywhere: stacks of lilies in copper pots, roses drooping out of blue bowls, expensive orchids, and high palms. In addition to the heavy perfume of the flowers came the smell of Eastern spices—spices burning in a small brazier, and the fine sharp scent of sandal wood. And every picture that Rodney had painted of late years was out for inspection, for easels stood everywhere—easels on which his canvases rested; and Fay had draped some of the easels with heavy brocade—rich antique-looking stuffs. And swords lay about—swords and daggers. And on an oak chest a heavy antique tome rested, whilst the fireplace was completely blocked up by a great ebony Buddha—a Buddha enthroned amidst flowers.

Rodney staggered helplessly against the wall. He had never seen such a room in his life, and his whole soul rose up in passionate revolt against the crudity of taste that could try to blend East and West together, and every style and age, apparently. And yet he could not deny that it was all extraordinarily effective—marvellously bizarre, even to the great boughs of crimson japonica that lit up a dark corner of the studio—whilst a dull silver crucifix stood on the mantelpiece with two small sphinx vases on each side, cast heavily in bronze.

The studio was a nightmare—but an appallingly brilliant nightmare for all that: something you would not forget in a hurry nor even wish to forget, and the crowd of people who filled it—the smart crowd—appeared to appreciate Fay's taste, for they were all talking of the wonderful color scheme that Mr. Darlington had got into his studio—the extraordinary vitality the room possessed. And Rodney realized that in some strange way the vivid background brought out the quiet and grave beauty of his sombre London studies—the pictures he had painted of mean streets and of gas-lit pavements—as nothing else could have done.

His "Old Match Seller of Piccadilly" had never showed to such advantage before, he thought, as she did now, standing out in her drab, hopeless poverty, whilst gold and crimson brocade draped the easel on which the picture rested. Oh, never, never had the pinched look of hunger in the old woman's face been so expressive—as with this rich background—and Rodney was hardly surprised to see how his wife's guests flocked round the canvas and spoke of the picture in low tones as a masterpiece, for the man had suddenly grown aware of his own genius.

Here, in an overdecked and unreal room—a room full of cheap, meretricious attempts after effect—the real was revealed, and Rodney's pictures shone out commanding, for the pictures he had painted of ragged London life had never had such a background before, nor had people ever seen them—the people who count.

"Now, there's my husband," Fay beckoned to Rodney cheerfully as he stood by the door. She was dressed in the most marvellous gown that he had ever seen her in. A lace frock that fitted her like a glove; a nasturtium-colored ribbon was threaded through her hair; nasturtium-colored ribbon belted her waist. She was talking to a dozen people at once, it seemed; moving from group to group, making her clear, joyous voice heard easily above the din, and her presence felt to an extraordinary degree. Her cheeks glowed brightly; her eyes were just like diamonds.

Rodney drifted towards her helplessly, and then, in a few seconds, he found himself in the centre of an excited crowd. Men and women whom he had never thought to meet, for they were all apparently so far above him in station and name, were shaking hands with him enthusiastically, and hailing him as a great painter; praising him for having taken the London pavements for his subjects—telling him he would from henceforth be known as London's artist.

Rodney felt intoxicated—bewildered. At last success had come to him. And what a success, financial as well as artistic! For here was an American—a

tall, lean, clean-shaven Yank, asking him to fix his own price for "The Match Seller," as he desired to be the proud purchaser, and then the American went on to commission Rodney to paint him other pictures all illustrative of London pavement life.

"For I guess Silas Greet is going to be first in the field this time." So the American announced with his not unpleasant drawl. "There'll be a certain amount of competition for your pictures, sir; but I'll have the whip-hand of the British public, if you please, let who will come after."

Rodney had muttered a few dry words of thanks, but he was hardly conscious of what he was saying—it was all too amazing—too bewildering. Then a great Bond Street picture-dealer came up and began to talk about having an exhibition of Rodney's pictures, and he said all sorts of flattering things to the artist, expressing his great pleasure at making Rodney's acquaintance, and prophesying a brilliant future for him; and just at that moment Fay dashed up, Sir John Vernon following at her heels, and as she introduced her husband to the world-famed diplomat, a little flashing smile played over her lips. It was something to have brought a man like Sir John to West Kensington.

The crowd melted away at last, but it was close on seven o'clock before Rodney found himself alone in his studio, for Fay had vanished with the last guest, and Rodney wondered if she had gone back to the house to change the wonderful lace gown she was wearing—the smart party frock.

He felt too dazed to leave the studio himself, the room which had suddenly become so strange and unfamiliar—a room he knew so well and where he had done so much hard work. But he had not known it in the weird trappings that it wore to-day, and the vivid stuffs with which Fay had elected to adorn it danced before his eyes, whilst the perfume of the flowers and the spices grew heavier and more oppressive every moment.

He walked up to his picture, "The Old Match Seller of Piccadilly," and gazed at the woman's face—the tired, pinched, London face—and as he stared at his own work, peace came to him. Peace and understanding and a great composure visited Rodney Darlington; his nerves steadied. Here, standing in front of his own masterpiece, he was sure of himself. He was no longer in a strange room—a strange world—he was standing close to his work; the grand work of his hands, of his brain.

"They have come to me at last—my public; they have sought me out; they have found me." The words fell slowly from his lips, and even as he said them, the heavy velvet *portière* that draped the studio door rustled back, and Fay slipped into the studio. But such a changed Fay! No longer a bright, electric little creature with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, and clear, vibrating voice, but a tired, little, wan, white shadow who moved forward somewhat unsteadily—Fay, who had seemingly trodden on air an hour ago—flashed—down.

She had changed her dress, too, just as Rodney had half suspected she would do, and he noticed, somewhat to his surprise, that she had put on one of the loose artistic gowns which he had been so fond of in the past, a gown that fell about her slim young body in graceful folds, and owed but little to the modern dressmaker's art.

"Fay, my dear, come to me." He turned and held out his arms. The sight of that beautiful drooping little figure moved him to a sudden pity, and a desire came to him to comfort her for what he knew not. For what had come over her? Why did she walk so slowly, and above all things look so wan and worn?

She moved towards him, falling almost helplessly into his arms, and laying her pale face against his coat, and he heard her draw a deep sobbing breath as she nestled against his heart.

"Sweet, you're not crying?" he whispered. "And not to-day of all days, for I've won my battle, Fay. I've conquered; the world believes in me at last. I have got more work offered me than I can possibly do—immense commissions—and you shall be rich, Fay. I will give you all those things which you desire—the things you love—dainty raiment to clothe your dainty body, and you shall lead the butterfly existence that pleases you so. You shall flash about in the sunshine all day and dance all night."

She gave an odd little laugh—the queerest little laugh in the world.

"Oh, Rodney," she whispered, "my dear, big, silly Rodney—my clever Rodney. And do you think I want to dance and go on as I've been going lately, and when I'm so tired, dear—oh! so tired!" She leaned still more heavily against his breast, and he bent his head down and gazed at her face, and what he read there filled him with startled astonishment, for he was beginning to understand things—to realize a little of the truth.

"They had to be brought here—the crowd," she muttered wearily, "to recognise your genius somehow, Rodney; and this seemed the only way of doing it: to become a sort of will-o'-the-wisp myself—a Jack-a-lantern—and lure the world here—glamour them to come here. But, oh! it's been weary work, and if it hadn't been for that legacy of a thousand

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TRAGEDY.

She'll be married to-night, and I'll be there to see

The fun and the tears and the joy.
She'd be hurt, to be sure, were I absent—for she

Was my playmate when I was a boy.
My playmate! Ah, yes, and the chum of my youth,

And my ideal, as years took their flight—

The one girl of all that I cared for, in truth—

And she's going to be married to-night!

Does she dream how it's hurting my heart to be there?

Can she guess all the anguish I'll feel?
She may look in my eyes—will she know, will she care

For the pain that my face may reveal?
Will she note if I shudder in sudden afright

At the solemn words sealing my doom?
Will she pity me? Ah, who can tell?

For to-night
She'll be married. And I am the groom!

PISCATORIAL.

A woman clerk in a Government office, who enjoys a well-earned reputation for wit, the other day very much disconcerted a young attorney. She announced that she was shortly going on her vacation, and the youthful cross-examiner inquired the lady's destination. "At Fish-hook," was the reply. "Where is that?" pursued the attorney. "At the end of the line," was the smiling rejoinder.

WHY HE SMOKED.

The visitor sniffed. "Excuse me, dear," she said, "but what a smell of smoke there is in this room! You surely don't allow your husband to smoke in the drawing-room?" "Well, not as a rule," replied her hostess, "but this morning—" "My dear," exclaimed the visitor, "you should never make exceptions in cases like this. I never do. My Freddie never smokes in our drawing-room on any consideration whatever." "Yes," began the young wife, "but—" "Nonsense, darling! There are no 'buts' at all! In the first place, it's for the sake of discipline. In the second, the ashes absolutely ruin one's carpets. And as for the thick air—Poo!" "I quite agree, sweet!" exclaimed the lectured one, spiritedly, getting in a word at last, "but this morning my husband simply had to smoke." "Indeed!" said the visitor, raising her eyebrows, "And why?" "Because," retorted her hostess, "his coat was on fire!"

PAID IN FULL.

A payment-by-installment dealer had sent out one of his young clerks to collect the weekly instalments from his customers, his regular collector being absent from business ill. When the young man returned the employer noticed that he looked rather "down in the mouth." "Get on all right?" asked the dealer. "So-so," replied the young man. "How about that Jones' bill? I suppose you collected that as you said that Mr. Jones was a friend of yours?" "Well, sir," said the clerk, "I don't know whether to rejoice or not at my success with Mr. Jones." "What do you mean?" "This, sir. When I went in and said, 'Mr. Jones, I've called to speak about a matter,' he interrupted me before I could proceed any farther with, 'That's all right, my boy; she's yours. Take her and be happy!'"

pounds, I could never have done it—never. For one has to have such hats; such dresses to please people—to fetch the eye—and I've had to talk so fast, so quick, and never be still for a single moment, and I've always had to laugh, and smile, and be gay—gay! But now it's all over. I've done what I had to do. They've found you out, Rodney. They've come and knocked at your door. They've seen what you had to show them."

She paused, conscious even as she spoke that her husband was clasping her to him as he had never clasped her before, not even during the days of their honeymoon, and she could feel rather than see the love in his eyes.

"My darling! Oh! my darling!" He muttered the words reverently, and she smiled up at him faintly—a little dim, flickering ghost of a smile.

"No more luncheon parties for me! and I don't want to dine out again for ages, and as for dances—" She gave a shudder. "Oh! how my feet ached! How my head has ached! But no one has ever known—no one has ever guessed. And now, Rodney, will you please take a little cottage somewhere in the country; a cottage we can go to for a holiday occasionally, and take me there soon—soon—for I want to see the green fields and the wise, soothing woods, and to feel the peace—the deep, hushed peace that veils the country-side. I want to rest a little, for rest will be so sweet!"

He bent over her. There were tears in his eyes; there were tears in his voice.

"To-morrow, dear," he whispered, "I will take you straight away into the country to-morrow. We will go and stay at some quiet place, and, think of it, Fay; oh, think of it! To-morrow night we will be walking in a country garden, and big white moths will flicker about; and maybe the scent of clover will come to us, and we shall hear the far-away tinkle of a sheep bell. And you shall rest between lavender-scented sheets, and maybe roses will nod their heads against the window of our bedroom, peeping in to bid you wake and greet the dawn."

She made no answer for a second, then her eyelids drooped wearily over her eyes.

"Ah, yes; take me somewhere where I can rest to-morrow," she whispered, "for, oh! I'm so tired—so tired!"

FAIR WARNING.

"Halloa, halloa!" shouted the fireman on the end of the telephone, in answer to a long ring. "Halloa!" came back in feminine tones. "Is this the fire station?" "Yes; what is it?" "Well, I want to inform you that my yard runs right up to the walk that runs along the side of the Cummingses' walk next door—" "I guess you've got the wrong number, ma'am." "You said this was the fire station, didn't you?" "Yes; but—" "Well, I want to say that I'm trying very hard to raise a respectable yardful of grass and have lately planted seed as far as the Cummingses' walk. Then, besides the grass seed, I had it all tidied up and made ready for planting bulbs, and—" "I say, ma'am, you are mistaken in the telephone number. This—" "Isn't this the fire station?" "It is; but—" "Very well. Now, I want to say further that, however careless our neighbors, the Cummingses, are with their garden, we are very, very much the other way. In fact, a pretty lawn, adorned with a variety of flowers, is what I and my husband are looking for next season, and we want our yard to appear as well clear up to the Cummingses' sidewalk as it is possible to have it. Why, I wouldn't any more allow a person to step on my grass seed or—" "For Heaven's sake, ma'am, what has this to do with the fire station?" "Oh, well, I want to inform you that our house is No. 200 School Street, and that the Cummingses' house next door is afire. Now, don't let your firemen trample—" But the fireman had dropped the receiver.